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# Writing in My Voice: Four Modalities of Myth-Writing in Taiwanese Indigenous Sinophone Literature

Dirk Kuhlmann

## ABSTRACT

This article treats the creative process of indigenous authors of Taiwan adapting various myths of their peoples in their Sinophone literary writings. Analyzing selected fictional works by Syaman Rapongan, Husluman Vava, Neqou Soqluman, and Badai, as well as a poem by Salizan Takisvilainan, I will discuss the authors' motivation for tapping into the mythology of their people in the quest for their individual authorial voice. A guiding question of this article is to what extent this recourse to traditional materials corresponds with a trend among indigenous Taiwanese authors of writing in their own voice, as Paelabang Danapan (Sun Tachuan) has proposed. I will discuss these adaptations of myths in light of a four-modality framework of myth-writing: myth as heritage, myth as lived tradition, myth as expression of human experience, and myth as source of inspiration.

**KEYWORDS** myth, myth-writing, cultural identity/ies, personal vs. communal perspectives, Sinophone indigenous literature, Taiwan

## Introduction

In this article, I will delve into the topic of myths and legends as a literary motif and a marker of identity in the Sinophone indigenous literature of Taiwan, based on a close reading of the following works: *Myths of Eight-Generation Bay* (*Badai wan de shenhua*, 1992) by the Tao author Syaman Rapongan;<sup>1</sup> *Hanido* (i.e., spirits) of *Mount Jade* (*Yushan de shengming jingling*, 1997) and *Soul of Mount Jade* (*Yushan hun*, 2006) by the Bunun author Husluman Vava (1958-2007);<sup>2</sup> *The Legend of Tongku Saveq* (*Donggu shafei chuanqi / Palisia Tongku Saveq*, 2008) by Neqou Soqluman (also Bunun);<sup>3</sup> *The Journey of a Wu Practitioner* (*Wu lü*, 2014) by the Puyuma author Badai; and *What Tina Says* (*Dina de hua*, 2010) by the Bunun author Salizan Takisvilainan.<sup>4</sup> These are five of the most prominent indigenous authors in Taiwan.<sup>5</sup>

Before venturing into the textual reading, I will offer a general discussion of myth-writing and the four specific modalities of retelling myths in literature, which will be the framework for my analysis of the five works mentioned above. Myth-writing by indigenous authors in the language of the mainstream society also entails re-negotiating the position of indigenous identities as distinct vis-à-vis the mainstream society's identity or as part of an overarching new identity. As such it is not only a literary project but also one of cultural politics. Within the scope of this article, this aspect can only be touched upon. However, to provide some background information on this, I will address the socio-cultural context of writing Sinophone indigenous literature in Taiwan, the authors' motivation and agency in

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<sup>1</sup> The name Syaman Rapongan means "Father of Rapongan," following the Tao tradition of adopting the name of the eldest son at his birth. For further biographical information, see "Syaman Rapongan" ([https://books-fromtaiwan.tw/authors\\_info.php?id=78](https://books-fromtaiwan.tw/authors_info.php?id=78)) and "Flowing Dream of the Ocean: Syaman Rapongan: Taiwan's Ocean Literature Writer" (<http://reading.udn.com/act/syaman/index-en.html>).

<sup>2</sup> *Hanido of Mount Jade* was Husluman Vava's debut publication and *Soul of Mount Jade* his representative work for which he was awarded the Taiwan Literature Award in 2007. For further biographical information, see "Writer-Husluman Vava" ([https://english.moc.gov.tw/information\\_226\\_77035.html](https://english.moc.gov.tw/information_226_77035.html)).

<sup>3</sup> Tongku Saveq is the Bunun name for Mount Jade (Yushan). *The Legend of Tongku Saveq* was Neqou Soqluman's debut work, which won the prestigious Wu Juo-Liu Literature Award in 2008.

<sup>4</sup> The word *tina* means "mother" in Bunun. For biographical information on the author, see "Bunun Poet: Salizan Takisvilainan" ([https://english.moc.gov.tw/information\\_236\\_77206.html](https://english.moc.gov.tw/information_236_77206.html)).

<sup>5</sup> At this point, I can only provide the view of male authors on the role of mythology; the perspective of female authors is a line of research I intend to pursue further.

creating their literary works, and the challenge of transmitting indigenous cultural content in Sinitic script.

## From Myth to Myth-Writing

For the concept of myth, I adopt Wendy Doniger's definition:

A myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past . . . that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is part of a larger group of stories. (3)

Accordingly, a key aspect of myths is their role as a repertoire of cultural memory and as identity marker through the act of transmission or retelling. Using the metaphors of the microscope vision (i.e., the personal perspective) and of the telescope vision (i.e., the general or communal perspective), Doniger further specifies myth as a "textual lens" that enables an in-between or double vision: "On this continuum between the personal and the abstract, myth vibrates in the middle; of all the things made of words, myths span the widest range of human concerns, human paradoxes" (8).

This in-betweenness (being at the same time a personal perspective and the general view of a communal cultural tradition transcending generations) matches the everyday ambiguity indigenous writers encounter in Taiwan, occasioned by their experience of the pressure of assimilation to mainstream society and a sense of belonging toward their cultural tradition. Thus, this ambiguity accounts for the appeal of retelling myths as a literary motif. Laura Feldt's study *The Fantastic in Religious Narrative from Exodus to Elisha* (2014) offers valuable insight into the way in which the subject of myth is treated in literary works (a topic she presented at the conference on "Literary Fantasy and Its Discontents"). While myths can serve as fantastic or wondrous literary material in a story, the plot elements taken from indigenous mythologies are at the same time meaningful core elements of the specific cultural identity with an inherent truth for the authors; I will return to this point when I discuss Badai. Feldt's approach is useful as it goes beyond the common dichotomy of "fantasy as skeptical literature" and "religious narratives/myths as focused on closure and fixing of meaning": she argues that religious narratives of fantastic events in effect "often confound distinctions, blur boundaries and actively generate ambiguity," a feature they in fact share with the narrative mode of fantasy literature (1, 55). Within the context of Taiwan's indigenous

literature, the fantastic narrative mode, be it in a retelling of a myth or a fantasy novel adaptation of a myth, thus has a distinct compensatory function in that it addresses elements that were up to now forgotten, underrepresented, repressed, or lost in mainstream culture (see Feldt 63-64).

The significance of the topic of myths and legends as a literary motif and a marker of identity in the indigenous literature of Taiwan is now gaining attention in the study of Sinophone indigenous literature. Pasuya Poiconu (Pu Chung-chen) closely links the development of modern indigenous literature of Taiwan to “self-conscious cultural movements” (Poiconu, *Literary* xvii). He argues that this literature is rooted in the original oral literature of the indigenous peoples, which serves as a medium to transfer cultural knowledge from one generation to the next through the retelling of myths, legends, and fables (Poiconu, *Literary* iv-vi). It unfolded in three stages: from the original or “performed oral literature” to “recorded oral literature” (that is, recorded by Japanese and Western Missionaries, and Han Chinese scholars) and to “written oral literature” (indigenous authors).<sup>6</sup> The third type is the focus of this article.

Pasuya Poiconu also emphasizes the ambiguous or flexible nature of myths in his *Literary History of Taiwanese Indigenous Peoples*: even central myths shared among members of the same tribe, such as the stories of the Great Flood and the Bunun’s retreat to Tongku Saveq, are presented with some variations by different villages. Some versions integrate elements from other cultures, such as the biblical myth of the Deluge, and describe the gathering of breeding pairs of all animals on the Tongku Saveq.<sup>7</sup> Following this practice of modification by the storyteller in the narration of myths, a modern author’s way of incorporating myths into his/her stories can be considered as treating myths as an “open code” (Russell 3) or an “evolving tradition,” in which elements of traditional culture are imbued with new meaning for a modern audience.

#### *Four Modalities of Myth-Writing*

Myth-writing can be understood in light of the degree to which myths as part of a communal cultural memory are adapted and personalized through the individual author’s storytelling. This “personal perspective” primarily refers to the degree of the author’s autonomy and agency toward the transmitted myths in the creative

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<sup>6</sup> On the characteristics and agents of these three stages, see Balcom xviii-xxi and Poiconu, *Taiwan* 1107-47 (in particular 1115-23 for the oral literature recorded by non-indigenous researchers). On the Japanese research during 1895-1945, see Shimizu Jun.

<sup>7</sup> For the myth of the Great Flood as told by the Bunun and the Tsou peoples, see, for instance, Pasuya Poiconu, *Literary* 73-82.

process. The guiding question in this article will be to what extent the author is present and noticeable as a narrator throughout the story. It also includes the individuality of a story's characters, that is, whether they are archetypal figures or well-rounded characters. This article proposes four modalities of myth-writing defined by the different levels on which authors negotiate between the personal and the communal perspectives. They will be presented in a progressing order from a predominantly communal perspective to a strong personal perspective. Thus, myths can figure as heritage, as a vital element of a "lived tradition," as traditional expressions of human experience shared across time, or as an inspirational or nourishing cultural source infusing an author with individual literary voice. First, treated as "heritage," myths function as a cultural archive considered to be unchangeable. As Laura Feldt puts it, the view that a myth is focused on closure or fixing meaning, rather than on creating ambiguity, is still widely held even in scholarly circles (247-48). In this mode of perception, myths can be "recorded" and "preserved" but not changed in the act of re-telling. Their retelling, as will be shown in the textual reading of Huslusman Vava's *Hanido of Mount Jade*, favors the communal perspective, leaving little room for the personal perspective with regard to expressing the author's own voice and the development of unique individual characters. Thus, they closely resemble "identity legends," which Terrence Russel describes as stories that "are central to the cultural identity of a people and are passed from generation to generation" (5). Like the original identity legends, these retellings can provide guidance and focus because they retain a strong communal perspective and on the surface level offer an unmodified version of the myths. Their significance for a modern readership corresponds to Nadine Riendeau's definition of the social function of identity legends: "[They] allow persons and associations of persons to know where they are in the world, how they came to be there and how they came to be doing what they are doing. Put another way, legends stabilize an otherwise problematic present" ("Conclusion"). However, if the ambiguity or interpretative openness of the myths is ignored, this stability comes at the cost of losing the actual flexibility in narrating or performing the myths mentioned above.

Second, myths may figure as part of a "lived tradition," as demonstrated in Huslusman Vava's *Soul of Mount Jade* and Syaman Rapongan's *Myths of Eight-Generation Bay*. I use this term as an echo to the concept of "lived religion" adopted in the volume edited by David D. Hall.<sup>8</sup> There, the authors develop the notion of

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<sup>8</sup> For the framework of "lived religion," see Hall vii-xii. For a case study of the concept of religion as a "lived tradition" or "way of life" for the Native American Ojibwe people, see McNally 47-48.

lived religion to highlight the element of practice and the embeddedness of myths in daily life via rituals where myths serve as a medium to transfer knowledge from one generation to the next and. Similarly, for my purposes here, we will see how practice helps to construct a continuous Bunun identity from past to future generations. The “lived tradition” approach is about myths as a medium “in action” to transfer cultural content through the generations. This modality allows for a stronger personal perspective concerning the author’s presence as a narrator; it may also allow for the development of the characters as distinct individuals. There is, however, still a limit to character development as these stories in general follow archetypical patterns. The author in this modality still emphasizes the importance of continuing the communal cultural memory as a “heritage.” The textual reading of Husluman’s novel and the story collection of Syaman Rapongan below will illustrate two different approaches within this modality.

In contrast, the third modality, that is, treating myths as “expressions of human experience,” can be considered as a further step toward the origins of a myth as stories that codify certain ways of “making sense of the world” which are thus rooted in a genuine human desire for understanding. As such, a myth remains open to different interpretations. Doniger describes the relation of myth to the experience behind it as “transparent” or neutral, that is, being open to multiple interpretations and retellings—in other words, myth as a “much-retold narrative that is transparent to a variety of constructions of meaning, a neutral structure that allows paradoxical meanings to be held in a charged tension” (89). This dimension of immersion into the world of myth characterizes the novels of Neqou Soqluman and Badai. The personal perspective in this modality is well-developed on the level of the author’s presence as a narrator as well as the individuality of the characters. In addition, the characters have an actual impact on the plot which consequently can modify the archetypical patterns of cultural memory.

In the fourth modality, a myth is treated as a source of cultural inspiration and may become a repository of narratives that the author taps into and creatively reconceives in his unique voice, as shown in Salizan Takisvilainan’s poem. In this modality, the personal perspective figures most strongly, while the communal cultural memory provides the author with the motif for his/her literary vision.

### *Socio-Cultural Context of Sinophone Indigenous Literature*

Shu-mei Shih, who inaugurated the field of Sinophone studies, explicitly addresses Sinophone indigenous literature of Taiwan as one significant subject of research. She emphasizes the unresolved colonization of indigenous people in Sinophone communities, which, according to her, is why “their cultural and political projects

tend to be centered on anticolonial or decolonial efforts.” She goes to argue that “[i]n this sense Sinophone aboriginal literature from Taiwan might offer the best parallel example with Sinophone Tibetan literature or Sinophone Uyghur literature” (Shih, “Introduction” 12). As will be shown below, there is indeed a strong element of asserting and reclaiming indigenous identities on the part of indigenous authors against the mainstream society through Sinophone literature.

Hsinya Huang offers a broader view on the cultural politics of Sinophone indigenous literature (see, in particular, 244-45). She dates the rise of Sinophone indigenous literature to the 1980s, when a generation of indigenous peoples in Taiwan who had received a substantial Sinophone education came of age. This matches the situation of all authors under discussion in this article. While being part of the cultural assimilation project of the mainstream society, proficiency in Mandarin Chinese offered this generation the very medium with which to protest against this official politics of subordination and to prevent the loss of the indigenous cultural memory. Sinophone literature thus becomes a means of cultural survival and resistance for indigenous authors. On the other hand, adapting indigenous myths in Sinophone literature helps to advance the opening up of “Taiwanese identity” for a pluralism of cultural sources. Paelabang Danapan’s (Sun Ta-chuan)<sup>9</sup> recollection of his mother’s life closes with the hope that Taiwanese indigenous peoples’ experiences may become a starting point for a shared Taiwanese history (“History” 115). Huang suggests that Taiwan’s indigenous people had a “significant impact on the dynamics and efforts to establish a distinct Taiwanese identity,” while simultaneously exposing the inherent problematic nature of mainstream society appropriating indigenous culture with the ulterior motive of supporting Taiwanese nativism (243-44).

An obvious marker for a shift in mainstream society’s awareness of the significance of Sinophone indigenous literature was the adaptation of the term “indigenous literature” (*yuanzhumin wenxue*) for these authors’ works, replacing “mountainscape literature” (*shandi wenxue*) and predominately including works on indigenous culture by non-indigenous authors. In addition, the publication of Sinophone indigenous literature is now sponsored by several Taiwanese publishing houses, such as INK Publishing, and “indigenous literature” has been a distinct field of research in Taiwan since the 1990s (Huang 244-45). However, while

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<sup>9</sup> Paelabang Danapan is the founder of the *Shanghai wenhua zazhi she* (Mountains and Sea Journal Association, established 1993). While the affiliated journal has been discontinued, the association continues to act as a literature and advocacy agency for indigenous authors by organizing the prestigious annual Award for Indigenous Literature of Taiwan, categories of which include novel, short story, poetry, and documentary literature.

Western researchers are becoming increasingly aware of Taiwanese indigenous literature, Darryl Sterk points out that studies of this literature remain marginal.

### *Indigenous Authors' Motivation and Agency*

The experience of being “displaced” within mainstream society and alienated from one’s own cultural identity is at the core of the indigenous writers’ concern with agency. According to Huang, “the articulation of the indigene groups as displaced and dispossessed cultures permeates contemporary Sinophone indigenous writings of Taiwan” (248). They are shaped by a strong motif of “homing-in” (250), which I take here as reconnecting with the communal cultural memory through literary works. This is a common feature shared by all of the novels and story collections as well as Salizan Takisvilainan’s poem under discussion in this article. They are clearly marked by the motif of returning/homecoming to one’s native indigenous culture.

As another significant ongoing trend in the indigenous literature of Taiwan, Paelabang Danapan introduces the author-focused trajectory “From *Other’s* Writing to *MY* Writing.” Adapting indigenous myths into literary works can be seen as an act of reclaiming one’s authority instead of simply presenting these myths from an out-group perspective. This trend matches the development toward a noticeable personal perspective in myth-writing, a prominent feature of which is writing in first-person narratives (Paelabang Danapan, “Introduction”). The out-group descriptions include those by Christian missionaries or Japanese scholars in pre-1945 Taiwan. A good example of this trend is Neqou Soqluman consistently referring to Yushan (Mount Jade) by its Bunun name Tongku Saveq in his novel, as this is a holy mountain to his people (11-12). This reclaiming project is accompanied by a certain sense of urgency over the crisis of indigenous culture. As Huang notes, “To redeem their oral traditions—the words of their ancestors—from oblivion is one of the important missions of modern tribal writers” (242). Reclaiming the rights to the myths can also serve to assert indigenous identities as different and significant vis-à-vis mainstream society. At the same time, the published works can serve as a medium through which to share the difference of indigenous culture. Such assertiveness is manifest in the reader’s reading experience as the author is very present as an intercultural mediator—though not necessarily as a narrator—in the text. As Huang summarizes it nicely, “Sinophone indigenous writers are intercultural translators/mediators, who work to explore and challenge the clear-cut boundaries” (252). This is a self-empowering conception of the authors’ role, resonating with the role of “guide” Russell ascribes to indigenous authors (5), as well as with the concept of the “hunter’s gift,” that is,

a successful hunter's sharing of prey, put forth by Sterk. Sterk extends this "gift" from a literary motif to a metaphor for the relationship between the indigenous author and the reader. In his understanding, the story becomes a gift shared by its creator with the reader, which displays the identity of the former and imposes it on the latter. It also entails a responsibility on the part of the recipient: the recipient must match it with a story of his or her own or, more practically, continue to share the story. Thus, a community is formed positively with the gift (Sterk 84, 96-100).

### *Strategies of Representing Cultural Difference*

To be sure, indigenous authors are under both social and economic pressure to adopt the Chinese language as their medium of storytelling if they intend to reach a wider readership. On the other hand, taking into account the indigenous authors' strong sense of agency, one must also see the publication of Sinophone literature as a project intended to influence mainstream culture. In this process, the difference between the character-based Chinese language and the indigenous languages transcribed in the Latin alphabet enables the indigenous authors to present their culture via their mythology in varying degrees of difference and thus inscribe them into mainstream Taiwanese identity.

The actual representation of cultural difference can be observed on two levels: first, the difference of concepts and worldviews, that is, the myths themselves and their cultural context. An obvious marker of "difference" which can be found in all the works under discussion here (with the exception of Husluman Vava's *Hanido of Mount Jade*) is the annotating or in-text commentary that explains indigenous terms, names, and cultural concepts. The extent can vary. Although the footnotes in Badai's novel are limited in number and brief, the author provides a compact introduction to Puyuma religious thinking and *wuxi* in a postscript. Syaman Rapongan uses footnotes as well as in-text remarks. Husluman Vava and Neqou Soqluman provide the most comprehensive comments in their novels. In my view, rather than aiming for exoticism, these annotations serve a didactic purpose: they highlight the fact that there is a limit to grasping the work solely on the basis of the text; the work cannot be understood without cultural mediation by the author, who is willing to share his knowledge.

Second, according to Shu-mei Shih, authors present the linguistic difference of indigenous terms, names, and concepts in a process shaped by "dialectal confrontation and negotiation" ("Against" 35). The authors under discussion have chosen at least three different ways of representing this difference: first, by keeping a "visible difference" by presenting these terms in Latin letters in the main text and

providing a Chinese transcription along with an explanation in the annotations (see Husluman Vava's, Syaman Rapongan, and Salizan); second, by maintaining an "accommodated difference," presenting terms in Chinese characters in the main text and in the Latin alphabet in the explanatory footnote (see Neqou Soqluman); and finally, by showing a "Siniticized difference," representing indigenous terms almost exclusively in Chinese characters (see Badai). Interestingly enough, though, all the story collections and novels discussed here always present religiously significant texts, such as ritual songs and songs of blessings, in the indigenous language romanized in the main text, followed by a Chinese translation (e.g., in *The Legend of Tongku Saveq*). The first method serves to keep the reader constantly aware of the different cultural context within the story, the second method provides a balance between an initial smooth reading of the story and the opportunity to engage more deeply with the indigenous cultural context and language in the footnotes, while the third approach is focused on presenting indigenous culture in a way that caters to a mainstream society reader's expectations.

## The Four Modalities of Myth-Writing in Close Reading

### *Myths as Heritage*

The stories Husluman Vava offers in his debut work *Hanido of Mount Jade*, which Pasuya Poiconu commends as an exemplar of modern indigenous "written oral literature" (*Literary* 1124), are categorized in three parts: "Humankind," which features among others the creation of humankind and the origin of the Bunun; "Animals," which includes stories about the Great Flood; and "Other Stories," which includes the myth of Shooting the Sun.

Since the Great Flood and Shooting the Sun are also relevant for the works of the Bunun authors Neqou Soqluman and Salizan Takisvilainan, I will briefly relate the respective plots as Husluman Vava presents them: the Great Flood was caused by mankind's ingratitude for the gifts of the Heavenly Spirit (*tianshen*, or *deqanin* in Bunun), who sent torrential rainstorms as a punishment. Because a giant snake blocked the outlet for all the waters of the world, the water level rose and humans were trapped at the peak of the highest mountain. Its members were saved by a giant crab willing to fight on their behalf if they would provide it with some armor. They did so by creating a clay pot that fit the crab perfectly. After the crab had vanquished the snake, mankind was able to settle once more in the mountain ranges and the valleys. To this day, the crab's descendants retain a shell-encased body; since this shell was originally made from clay, a crab's body will always turn red when boiled (Husluman Vava, *Hanido* 117-26).

The myth of Shooting the Sun<sup>10</sup> refers to the beginning of time when there were two suns. They alternated in crossing the sky, creating an eternal day. Mankind tried to eke out a living under these conditions by working the land. One day a couple went to the fields and left their baby girl at the border of the field, covered with leaves to protect her from the sunshine. However, the girl shriveled under the heat and became a centipede. The grieving father set out to the highest mountain with a bow and arrow to take revenge upon the suns. Eventually, he was able to shoot out the eye of one sun. This sun turned dark and turned into the moon, which then grasped the father and demanded an explanation for his deed. After hearing him out, the moon chided the father for not taking proper care of his daughter. Chastised, the father offered his breast pouch to the moon as an eye patch, which manifests as a dark spot on the face the moon to this day (149-53).

Husluman Vava chooses to present these myths as “closed” stories without offering personal mediation as an author—that is, he chooses not to be an active narrator who comments upon the myths or links them to their respective greater story cycle. In so doing, he highlights their function as communal cultural memories. For example, the stories of the holy animals, the toad and *qaipis* bird (a bulbul) who tried to bring fire to the Bunun on Tongku Saveq during the Great Flood, are separated from the Flood myth by an unrelated story (99-104). In addition, Husluman Vava presents them in a “just-so stories” mode, as explanations for certain phenomena—the existence of the sun and moon in the case of the Shooting of the Sun, or of the crab’s shell in the Great Flood myth. While some protagonists of the stories, such as the father who shoots the sun, do have individual names, most characters rather remain archetypes defined by their role (e.g., a father) than become distinct characters. Husluman Vava thus acts mostly as a scribe who just transmits the cultural archive without altering or arranging this material on the surface level. This way, he gives these stories an authentic, unedited, and timeless feel and further highlights them as essential elements of Bunun culture or “identity legends,” as defined by Riendeau and Russell mentioned above.

### *Myths as Part of a “Lived Tradition”*

In Husluman Vava’s *Soul of Mount Jade* and Syaman Rapongan’s *Myths of Eight-Generation Bay*, myths figure as part of a “lived tradition.” Thus, in *Soul of Mount Jade*, Bunun myths are integrated into the overall plot. Husluman Vava again chooses the detached perspective of a third-person narrator who follows Wumasi,

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<sup>10</sup> This constitutes another myth shared among all indigenous people of Taiwan. See, for instance, Pasuya Pocians, *Literary* 41-48; Syaman Rapongan 16-19. For a bilingual edition of another Bunun retelling of this myth, see Xu Jinhu and Ouyang Yu 66-73, 74-77.

a young boy living in the mountain ranges of Tongku Saveq, through the annual circle of Bunun life as well as through the stages of his individual coming-of-age journey. The first part comprises chapters 1 to 10. It is focused on the cycle of sowing, growing, and harvesting millet, and finishes with a chapter on the “ear-shooting ceremony,” a rite of passage that marks Wumasi’s transition into the ranks of the Bunun hunter-warriors. The second part is also divided into ten chapters; Wumasi enters the world of the hunters and is made acquainted with the importance of the spirits of the ancestors and the *hanido* whose power influence the outcome of a hunt (Husluman Vava, *Soul* 225-31). Wumasi also grows familiar with women, first through the rather scary legend of the “tribe of lost women” (part 2, ch. 7) his fellow hunters tell him of, and then by meeting Abusi, whom he eventually marries (305). The novel closes with this marriage and the birth and blessing of Wumasi’s son, who will continue the circle of Bunun life (part 2, ch. 10).

Throughout the novel, the author emphasizes the strong bond between Wumasi and his grandfather, Dalumu of the Husluman clan, who acts as his guide to the practical and spiritual aspects of Bunun life around Tongku Saveq. Husluman Vava integrates Bunun myths into the characters’ actions while furthermore alluding to these myths’ general function. To give an example: resting in the mountains, Wumasi notices a small valley and some ravines that are said to be dents in the armor of the giant crab and the tracks of the defeated snake. He remembers hearing the story of the Great Flood as told by his grandfather late in the evening at the fireside. This passage to some extent follows Husluman Vava’s version in *Hanido of Mount Jade*.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, it is enriched by dialogic exchanges between the elder and his infant audience to demonstrate the interactive nature of the presentation of myths. Thus, the author exemplifies how a myth can root a people to certain places and practices by creating a bond between generations and providing a way of transferring life experience from one generation to the next (Husluman Vava, *Soul* 12-20).<sup>12</sup> Again, the communal perspective on the tribal myths is stronger than the personal perspective in Husluman Vava’s *Soul of Mount Jade*. While the characters are distinct individuals, their story retains a noticeable archetypal nature: all their activities are embedded in the main plot of the novel, that is, the grand circle of Bunun life, on which they have little influence beyond

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<sup>11</sup> Some of the plot elements are phrased particularly similarly, from the defeat of the twenty Bunun hunter-warriors to the crab’s pledge to challenge the snake. Compare, for instance, Husluman Vava, *Hanido* 121-23. and *Soul* 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> The infusion of myths in everyday life is also central to Husluman Vava’s short story “Hu! Bunun,” which shares the objective of *The Soul of Mount Jade* in capturing the quintessence of (male) Bunun life from birth to death, albeit in a more immediate and engaged I-narrator’s perspective. See Pasuya Poiconu’s analysis in *Taiwan* 968-70.

transferring the cultural memory to the next generation.

Syaman Rapongan's debut work, *Myths of Eight-Generation Bay*, is a collection of stories and fables divided into two parts. The first part consists solely of Tao myths retold as short stories: for example, a story of the two suns that differs somewhat from versions told on Taiwan's main island in that the sun scorching the baby girl is cursed by the girl's mother; when the Heavenly Spirit takes pity on her, the offending sun is transformed into the moon (Syaman Rapongan 16-19). Compared with Husluman Vava's authorial presence in *Hanido of Mount Jade*, Syaman Rapongan chooses to act as a much more active narrator by offering context to some stories: for example, in the story of the giant Si Kazozo who grew so tall that he had to lift the sky upwards. In introducing this story, Syaman Rapongan elaborates on the custom of Tao parents telling stories to their children in the evening and mentions this story as one of those explicitly deemed unsuitable for children (22-23). The central story of the second part as well as the most elaborate story of the whole volume is the "Myth of the Flying Fish" (*Feiyu de shenhua*) (128-46). This story explains the origin of Tao culture, in particular the myths and taboos about the flying fish (*alibangbang* in Tao), whose passage marks the most important period in the Tao year. According to this myth, in the beginning the Tao did not appreciate the flying fish more than any other fish. They even prepared them together with other fish and seafood in one dish. As a consequence, illness struck not only the Tao but also the flying fish people. Therefore, the spirit of the flying fish, a dark-winged fish, visited the Tao's elders in a dream and told them the proper way of treating the flying fish to ensure the well-being of both peoples: for example, the flying fish must not be mingled with other fish during preparation, cooking, or eating, and even the term for cooking flying fish must differ from that of cooking any other seafood. At the close of the catching season of the flying fish, which pass through the seas of Orchid Island from February to June, the Tao were to offer their thanks to the spirit of the flying fish (136-40).

Syaman Rapongan strives to add the personal perspective of the author to his retelling of myths. In this, his approach differs greatly from that of Husluman Vava. A noticeable feature of this second part of *The Myths of Eight-Generation Bay* is the interweaving of Tao myths with Syaman Rapongan's autobiographic recollections, in which he figures even more strongly as a personal narrator. The "Myth of the Flying Fish" is framed as two stories focusing on the author's experiences: "The Sound of the Wind on the Ocean at Night" ("Heiye Haiyang de fengsheng") introduces this myth as part of his earlier childhood memories. Hearing this story being told by the Tao fishermen after they have returned from the sea became a focal point for Syaman Rapongan's own journey toward a writer (118-27). Apart

from that, this story also tackles the topic of the encounter between the Tao and the cultural “Other,” that is, the Han Chinese mainstream culture enforced upon the Tao in primary education on Orchid Island in the 1960s. Syaman Rapongan relates the discrimination against Tao pupils as being “backward” or “barbarian” people who need to abandon their native culture and become Siniticized. The Han Chinese teacher is not able to interact successfully in this intercultural encounter and gain a proper, or even basic, understanding of Tao culture. This is exemplified in the teacher’s inability to swim, because of which he attempts to forbid his pupils, who are quite capable swimmers, to go into the ocean. “My Childhood” (“Wode tongnian”) repeats and intensifies this motif of cultural ignorance and cross-cultural clashes: the teacher who enters Orchid Island on his *mission civilisatrice* is portrayed as carrying the lecture books in one hand and a whip in the other (147-50). Both stories are shaped by a strong subtext of asserting Tao culture vis-à-vis Han Chinese mainstream society. At first glance, Syaman Rapongan follows an approach similar to *Hanido of Mount Jade*, as the myths themselves are also presented as “closed” stories. However, he chooses a different way to highlight the authenticity of these stories by providing cultural contexts and linking these myths to his autobiographic stories. He also presents these myths as elements of a “lived tradition” and, furthermore, introduces the dimension of historical change and transformation through relating his individual experience. In contrast, the “lived tradition” of Husluman Vava’s *Soul of Mount Jade* presents a timeless perspective on Bunun life, similar to *Hanido of Mount Jade*: the plot cannot be pinpointed to a certain date, especially as it remains focused on the village of Wumasi and includes neither references to historical events outside of the village nor interactions with cultural “Others” such as the Han Chinese or the Japanese. The key events are the stages of Wumasi’s path from childhood to adulthood and the annual rituals of preparing the fields, sowing the crops, and harvesting the millet. Thus, Husluman Vava re-creates the Bunun way of living in an idealized and isolated form, as the “village in one’s mind” or “imagined village” (*xinli de buluo*) so as to better introduce his readers to the Bunun culture (Pasuya Poiconu, *Taiwan* 981).

### *Myths as Expression of Human Experience*

Neqou Soqluman’s epic fantasy novel *The Legend of Tongku Saveq* is set in the world of the two islands, with Bunun people living on the southern island and the holy mountain Tongku Saveq rising on the northern island. The peace of the two islands is threatened by the evil *wu* practitioner Maqai. Considered cursed as the later born of a pair of twins, Maqai was abandoned at birth to die. He is saved by a malignant *hanido* and raised to become a *wu* practitioner of supreme power who

uses his skills to seek revenge. The novel starts with Maqaiu attacking his home village with an army of dwarfish dark humans, who live underground, and killing his twin brother. Sayinu, the son of this brother, has been sent away by his father in time to escape the massacre of his people. He becomes a lone hunter who witnesses the birth of a child in the Soqluman clan with the mark of the moon on his arm. This numinous event is also announced by the arrival of a white *muntjac*, one of the forms the kind *hanido* Subina is able to assume. The child is called Buan (denoting “son of the moon” in Bunun) and grows up according to Bunun traditions. Meanwhile, Maqaiu proceeds in his evil machinations: a plot to kill the little Buan by having him abducted and devoured by a monstrous *hanido* is foiled, as the mark of the moon protects Buan from evil. When Buan is about to come of age, Maqaiu makes his endgame move: he enlists the help of a hellish snake to turn the moon into a second sun to scorch the earth. With this return of the age of the two suns, all kinds of mythical events and creatures come to haunt the two islands again. To save the world, Buan embarks on a quest to the Tongku Saveq. He is joined by Subina, Sayinu, his brother Sanluoke, and the dwarf Maputis. As the highest place on earth and the last refuge of mankind since time immemorial, the holy mountain Tongku Saveq is the only place where Buan has a chance to shoot the second sun to save the world.

The protagonist of Badai’s young-adult fantasy novel *Journey of a Wu Practitioner*<sup>13</sup> is Meiwan, a fifteen-year-old girl who discovers that she can perform magic during her English test: unwittingly she writes down a spell in the language of her people, the Puyuma, and recites it. Her father, Mr. Hawu (a nickname meaning the “The cheerful *wuxi*”), like the author himself, is a researcher of the traditional *wuxi* way and starts teaching her the proper rituals to become a practitioner (38-51; p. 41 has an explicit text-internal reference to Badai, *Dařamaw*). However, Meiwan’s powers grow very fast; she is soon able to communicate with spirits and to let her soul wander through time and space. On these journeys, she mediates between the warring ancient tree spirits and meets her ancestor *wu* practitioners, who teach her in the proper ways of a *wuxi*. After helping to solve the mystery of a baby girl born with strong *wuxi* powers in the seventeenth century alongside the legendary practitioner Sibuyi, she returns to her time as a full *wuxi* herself.

The novels of Neqou Soqluman and Badai reclaim myths as a genuine expression

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<sup>13</sup> This term *wu*, also *wushi* or *wuxi*, originally signifies a religious expert or supervisor of rituals, in particular a shaman. Though often translated as “witch” or “wizard,” I will refrain from using these terms to avoid their superficial assimilation into a Western concept. On the unique aspects of the *wuxi* as opposed to concept of “shaman,” see Badai, *Dařamaw* 44-51.

of human experience, as flexible ways of making sense of the world. They depart from the concept of myth as “heritage” or “lived tradition” by adding to it the dimension of an evolving process. This means foremost that both authors develop a strong personal perspective with regard to their role as a narrator as well as the individuality of the characters in their novels. These characters become rounded protagonists whose actions have an impact on the plot of the novel.

Neqou Soqluman chooses to combine the concepts of the “lived tradition” and the evolving process as two distinct parts of his novel. In the first part, Bunun mythology figures as a “lived tradition,” to introduce readers to the Bunun culture and everyday life, quite similar to Wumasi’s coming-of-age in *Soul of Mount Jade*: as Buan grows up, he learns about the various myths and the Bunun way of life guided by the *samu* (*shamu ban*). This is a collection of rules and taboos preserved on a wooden tablet and handed down from the time of the Great Flood. The violation of a great *samu* taboo provides Maqaiiu with the opportunity to complete his plan: he aids a young man who seeks a relationship with a female cousin, which is considered incestuous, with evil magic. Although the young man regrets his deed, he is unable to overcome the spell and even kills a toad that is trying to help. As the toad is a holy animal, a messenger of the highest spirit “Heaven beyond Heaven” (*deqanin; tianshang de tian*) since the age of the Great Flood, the highest spirit withdraws his protection from the world; as a consequence, the plan of the evil *wu* practitioner Maqaiiu can unfold (Neqou Soqluman 152-57). From then on, the story takes a full turn toward the fantastic with all legends coming to life again on the two islands. In the course of the story, Buan becomes more and more immersed into the age of legends and interacts with various myths. For example, a giant crab comes to their rescue against the onslaught of fish demons when the fellowship tries to cross the ocean to the northern island (219-22). Unlike in the first part, where Neqou Soqluman seeks to recreate traditional Bunun life, in this second part, he takes great care to present these interactions not as mere re-enactment of myths, but rather as Buan’s individual re-encounters within the framework of his own quest: A crucial difference is that he does not shoot the sun in revenge, but saves it and the world from an evil spirit that took possession of it.

Neqou Soqluman aims to fill the Bunun myths with new meaning so that they may speak to a modern audience. His outreach approach also ties in with a strong Christian imagery that permeates *The Legend of Tongku Saveq*. The author himself emphasizes the Bible as another inspirational source. This is most noticeable in his description of the *samu*, which closely resembles the tablets of the Ten Commandments and the violation of the taboo that is described in the imagery

of a “fall from grace” (54-56, 155-56).<sup>14</sup> On a more abstract level, the plot is characterized by the motifs of repentance, salvation, and hope. Thus, the holy bird *qai pis* who aids Buan in the final step of his quest encourages him with the words, “Hope is the source of power and of freedom to prevail against evil” (294). There are two aspects to this hope: to prevail against the utmost challenges of evil, but also to be able to return home after victory. As Tongku Saveq is both the only place where the world can be saved and the place where it has been saved already, making it the ancient homeland of mankind, Buan’s quest is actually a homecoming. The novel concludes with Buan planning to return one day to live around Tongku Saveq. Neqou Soqluman’s novel is sometimes advertised as the “Taiwanese *Lord of the Rings*” and taps into Tolkien’s story (both the novels and the movies), a source of inspiration the authors also acknowledge. However, while this might be his initial motivation to write a fantasy novel, ultimately Neqou Soqluman’s aim was to create a literary work that actually goes beyond Tolkien’s novel in a significant aspect. It is a piece of literature that gains even more vigor from the fact that it is rooted in a genuine human culture and lifeworld rather than in an invented culture and mythology.<sup>15</sup>

While their ways of storytelling are significantly different, at heart of both Neqou Soqluman’s and Badai’s novels is the concern with an indigenous audience in Taiwan, that is, the question of how to reconnect with one’s native culture. Badai’s novel about Meiwan’s journey toward becoming a *wu* practitioner can be read as an allegory of someone being alienated from one’s communal cultural memory and trying to reconnect with it. This alienation is made visible within the text when Meiwan reads aloud the first words of the spell she has just written down—*Hala demuwanna alaka*—which are presented in the Latin alphabet, set perpendicular to the other running text. She reads them not in her native language, nor in the Latin text, but in Chinese: 哈拉 ... 德姆哇姆萬 ... 阿拉卡. With the rituals and practices of the *wuxi* representing Puyuma culture, the three major characters of the novel stand for different degrees of connectedness: Meiwan’s grandmother, a powerful *wu* practitioner herself, has grown up in Puyuma culture; Meiwan’s father, like many indigenous people of the mid-age generation, is very familiar with his culture albeit on an academic or aloof level; and Meiwan represents the younger generation, which has a chance to once again fully immerse itself in its native culture. Meiwan is chosen as a *wuxi* while her father, despite his

<sup>14</sup> While Pasuya Poiconu (*Taiwan* 1068-72) has criticized *The Legend of Tongku Saveq* as a retelling of Bunun myths in a “Christian key,” the novel actually testifies to the cultural and religious plurality in indigenous identities in Taiwan and the flexibility in retelling these myths; see note 10 above.

<sup>15</sup> Neqou Soqluman, personal communication, Douliu, 13 Jan. 2018.

knowledge, is not. A specific feature of Badai's novel is the appearance of the Han Chinese majority culture of Taiwan as an "Other": the principal of Meiwan's school, for instance, is actually a Daoist practitioner who further unlocks Meiwan's powers as a *wuxi* by casting a spell on the whole school.

Beyond this meta-reading of the novel *Journey of a Wu Practitioner* as a story of cultural alienation, Badai's own view on this story takes us straight to the core of the myth as expression of genuine human experience: the author truly believes that certain people (indigenous as well as non-indigenous) are born with the spiritual gift of becoming a *wu* practitioner and are able to interact with their environment on this level. For him, the greatest danger and harm lies in individuals being ignorant about their abilities and thinking that methods should be created to develop these abilities. As the story of Meiwan shows, realizing this potential in oneself can be rather disturbing. Venturing to a much deeper level than an entertaining fantasy novel, the *Journey of a Wu Practitioner* is therefore also intended to offer advice and reassurance to those who have similar spiritual experiences.<sup>16</sup> All these different readings of Badai's novel highlight the complexity of the adaptation of myths in the works of indigenous authors as well as the challenge for an outside observer to stay aware of these myths as meaningful elements of the authors' life-worlds: even in literary works, these myths are more than literary motifs or mere fantastic embellishment to exotify a story. This aspect, which I can only touch upon here, surely merits further research and respectful, open-minded exchange with individual authors.

### *Myths as a Source of Inspiration and Nourishment*

Salizan Takisvilainan's work taps deeply into Bunun and other mythologies; for this article, I will introduce a poem taken from his first anthology *What Tina Says*. Myths stand as one of several sources of inspiration and nourishment (*yangfen*) for Salizan Takisvilainan's poetic storytelling, which ventures beyond retellings or adaptations of indigenous myths. The poem I would like to discuss here, "The Forgotten Stone Tablet" ("Yiwang de shiban") is permeated by the motif of rediscovering and evolving Bunun culture:

#### The Forgotten Stone Tablet

Once more let us pick up the words from the stone tablet  
That our people left behind in the flowing river

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<sup>16</sup> Badai, personal communication, Taipei, 18 Nov. 2018.

In the Age of the Flood  
Once more  
Carve them onto a wooden tablet  
Weave them into clothes and ornaments  
Write them onto a blank paper  
Play them on the keyboard

Carving out the covenant with the Moon  
Weaving in the gratitude and grievances of the Hundred-Pacer-Snake  
Writing down the legends of our ancestors  
Play forth the conversations with the *hanido*

Once more let us pick up the words from the stone tablet  
That our people left behind in the flowing river  
In the Age of the Flood

Once more let us  
Use Japanese to grasp the lore of the かみさま  
Use Chinese to grasp the legends of the origin of ㊦ ㊧,  
rivers and streams  
Use Romanized transcription to grasp the whispers of the *madadaingaz*  
To let the words of the ancestors breeze through our homeland as before.

This poem taps into the myth of an original Bunun written tradition that was preserved on a stone tablet in the age before the Great Flood. It was entrusted to the elder of two brothers, who were unable to prevent it from sinking and becoming lost in the waters (Salizan Takisvilainan, personal communication, FB messenger, 16 November 2018). Here, the Great Flood becomes a strong metaphor for the submergence of Bunun, and by extension indigenous cultures in general, in contemporary Taiwan's strong currents of modernization. However, the poetic narrator does not fall back into cultural pessimism and consider the communal cultural memory lost, but rather creates a wake-up call to meet the challenges by bringing Bunun culture into this age step by step: he suggests a gradual process of recovery from traditional means of transmission, such as carving and weaving, to modern forms such as writing and music, as well as a progression from central myths, like the "Covenant of the Moon," to minor myths, like the *Hanido*. While this part maintains an exclusive Bunun perspective, the last stanza suggests that this project should not rest solely on the Bunun's efforts. Rather, they should reach

out in this quest to other cultural influences and resources in Taiwan, that is, the Japanese concept of *kamisama* (a respectful term for spirits and deities), the Chinese myth of the giant Pangu, out of whose body the world was created, and the Western contribution of the Romanization of the Bunun language. These influences are each represented in their specific writing systems. Thus, the poem emphasizes the personal perspective and agency within the recovery of the communal cultural memory.

## Conclusion

As can be observed from the five literary works under discussion, a key motivation of the authors is reclaiming the authority to retell their indigenous culture, i.e., to move from being recorded by others to writing in their own voice and personal perspective, toward “my writing.” This is most noticeable in Syaman Rapongan’s collection *Myths of Eight-Generation Bay*, which features autobiographic accounts in the first-person narrative. A more indirect way is the insertion of references to the author’s family or village association into the story: In *Soul of Mount Jade*, the author introduces Wumasi and his family as part of the Husluman clan (Husluman Vava, *Yushan hun* 30), and Buan is born into the Soqluman clan in *The Legend of Tongku Saveq* (Neqou Soqluman 28). In *Journey of a Wu Practitioner*, Meiwan’s Puyuma background, the Daḷamagaw village, is identical with the author’s. In addition, as noted above, there is a most striking resemblance between the author and Mr. Hawu as a scholar of the Daḷamagaw *wuxi* practice. A more abstract approach can be observed in the title of Salizan Takisvilainan’s collection *What Tina Says*, which creates a family link with the poetic I-narrator throughout the poems. These references to the author’s background serve as a testimony to the authenticity of the stories told as literary works. Beyond the aspect of entertainment, they are of high significance and meaning to the author and his group. There are also traces of the permeating theme of displacement or its counterpart “homing-in,” as observed by Huang.

Applying Doniger’s metaphor of the microscope and the telescope to the four modalities of myth-writing, we can observe a trajectory that leads toward a more finely tuned balance of these two views among the literary works under discussion. The modality of “myth as heritage” is characterized by a communal perspective and a transmission of the traditional myths, as can be seen in Huslusman Vava’s *Hanido of Mount Jade*, where the author is not noticeably present. This changes with the modality of “myth as lived tradition,” in which authorial comments introduce a personal dimension, as can be seen particularly strongly in the case of

Syaman Rapongan's retelling. An even more individualized retelling and thus a stronger shift from the communal to the personal perspective occurs within the modality of "myth as expression of human experience," which shapes the works of Neqou Soqluman and Badai. Here, the authors embed myths in the stories of their characters who interact with them, creating a world of myths rooted in tradition that the author's retelling has modified to a certain degree. This distinguishes both works from Husluman Vava's novel, in which the Bunun myths only have a mediate influence on Wumasi, and Syaman Rapongan's story collection, in which the author presents myth and personal experience in separate stories. Salizan Takisvilainan's poetry is shaped by a strong I-narrator who mingles the communal cultural memory encoded in myths and personal perspective to create a unique vision rooted in Bunun and other cultures. As a result of opening up the communal and traditional perspective to accommodate a personal perspective in the retelling of myths, their conception changes from a fixed "cultural archive" toward viewing them as a cultural resource that can be evolved by the means of literary works.

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## Appendix

遺忘的石板

重新拾回洪水時代  
族人 遺留在河水中  
石板上的文字  
將文字重新  
雕刻在木板上  
編織在服飾上  
書寫在白紙上  
敲打在鍵盤上

雕刻出 與月亮的約定  
編織出 與百步蛇的恩怨  
書寫出 與祖靈的傳說  
敲打出 與哈尼杜的交談

重新拾回洪水時代  
族人 遺留在河水中  
石板上的文字

重新  
利用日語 捕捉かみさま<sup>17</sup>的訊息  
利用漢語 捕捉☉ 月<sup>18</sup>江河的傳說  
利用羅馬拼音 捕捉！madadaingaz<sup>19</sup>的呢喃

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<sup>17</sup> かみさま: 日語 kamisama 神的尊稱。

<sup>18</sup> ☉ 月: 漢語象形字的日、月。

<sup>19</sup> madadaingaz 布農語老人、祖先之意。

